

'Midsummer' is funny, far out fairy tale

Neil Coker, TLH blogger 1:07 p.m. EDT April 16, 2015



Everything you need to know about the reborn Southern Shakespeare Festival's outdoor production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is embodied in a pre-show announcement: Should the roar of a nearby train interrupt the proceedings, the cast will stop the action and invite the audience to join them in singing "Hello, I Love You" by The Doors.

It's definitely not a traditional, stuffy Shakespearean snooze-fest.

On Wednesday evening, I was treated to an early look at "Midsummer," a rhapsodic fable of hapless lovers, forest nymphs and meddling forces. Centuries after it was written, it remains the quintessential fairy tale.

As we're prone to do with fairy tales, the story has been updated. Athens and Fairyland receive a facelift fit for 1967, awash with cat's-eye glasses, gaudy hippie couture, tie-dye patterns, floral headbands, psychedelic music and imagery — all the fixings of the counterculture. A live band keeps it hip.

In this Summer of Love setting, the players live in their parts. Nick Johnson as Lysander — done up like Jimi Hendrix — drives home the free-loving idealism of his character, strumming a guitar for his love, Hermia (Nora Bonner). Hermia shares his feelings but their union is forbidden by her father Egeus (Duncan Hoehn). Johnson is African-American; Hoehn is Caucasian, and director Lanny Thomas uses this coincidence to reflect racial tensions of the Civil Rights era, something Bill Shakespeare could not have seen coming. The result is stirring.

Shaking things up are Laura Johnson's earnest Helena countering Jake Armstrong's cavalier Demetrius. Watching over the four young darlings are the Fairies: Oberon, the Fairy King (Phil Croton), dressed like a certain "King" of rock and roll, sends his "shrewd and knavish sprite" Puck (Colin Wulff) on a mission that goes awry by way of mistaken identity.

The rapport between the two is tickling to watch, as are their dealings with Oberon's alienated queen Titania (Marci Duncan). Titania and her flock of flower-girl fairies demand a little "R-E-S-P-E-C-T," but are ensnared by the same spell that befalls the mortals.

For even more comic relief, the group known as the Rude Mechanicals — a band of dunderheaded manual laborers turned would-be actors — are led by guest professional actor Jef Canter. This group makes up the final cog in the "Midsummer" dream machine, staging a play-within-a-play that amusingly resembles a satire of the author's own work.

Tallahassee native and New York Equity actor Canter has come a long way to play Nick Bottom, the haughty, overzealous weaver-turned-donkey. As Bottom, he's like no other I've experienced; he possesses an energetic quickness entangled with an oafish hedonism that leads to complacency and sloth. It's like Bottom with a dash of Falstaff. I absolutely loved every moment he took the stage.

As with any outdoor production, the weather is an unpredictable element. Rain or shine, the festival and show will run as scheduled, but it's challenging to stage a full theatrical production in an outdoor space in the middle of April. Bring an umbrella, just in case.

Accessible, fun and full of laughs, it's not only the best production of "Midsummer" I've seen, it's the best Shakespeare I've seen live. Sweetened further by the fact that it's completely free, it's a must-see for anyone with a pulse.

If you go

What: "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday through Sunday; there is a day-long Renaissance Festival in the park on Saturday, too

Where: Cascades Park Amphitheater

Cost: Free and family-friendly

Visit: www.southernshakespearefestival.org